

Lisianthus (*Eustoma Grandiflorum*), A New Species for the Cut Flower Market

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A wildflower known in certain western states as Prairie Gentian has fallen into the hands of plant breeders to become a really hot new cut flower species - lisianthus. This flower is beautiful. The blooms are graceful and refined. They resemble rose buds on long sturdy stems. I especially like the deep vibrant blue colors and the white picottees rimmed with blue or pink. This species is selling very well as a cut flower in both wholesale and retail markets throughout the United States. In 2001 the average wholesale price for lisianthus, mostly from California, was \$10 per bunch of ten stems. Premium quality lisianthus brought \$1.50 per stem. The florists love lisianthus because it has a long vase life, long stems and a refreshing new look.

Lisianthus grows well in Virginia. Last summer I grew a variety called "Flamenco" at Virginia State University's Randolph Farm. This particular variety is supposed to be the most heat tolerant hybrid. My plot of Flamenco looked very good at our Agriculture Field Day on August 28th. These were set out from 48 cell transplants under trickle irrigation on June 10th, to achieve a strongly blooming stand for that specific date.

Beginning growers who want to maximize production and sales should successively plant heavy plugs or transplants in mid-April, mid-May and mid-June. The most efficient way to grow lisianthus is to plant in wide raised beds at a spacing of 8" X 8". A bed that is 3 feet wide can accommodate four rows. Two rows of drip tape must be used for irrigation. The entire bed should be covered with woven plastic weed barrier, horticultural paper or plastic mulch for weed control. One layer of nylon plant support netting should be placed 16 inches above the bed. Lisianthus is very difficult to grow from seed. The seed is tiny and does not germinate well. All growers are advised to set out transplants grown from plugs rather than from seed.

Two lisianthus varieties I recommend for planting in April and May are "Echo" and "Mariachi". These are both double flowering varieties. Color selections include blue, champagne, rose, pink, white, pink picottee, blue picottee and yellow. The florists primarily buy the deep blue color but they buy the other colors as well. From Spring plantings, these varieties will bloom in June and July and will re-bloom in September. If this established crop of lisianthus is left in the field over the winter the plants will bloom once again very well in June of the following year.

The one insect pest that can cause severe damage in lisianthus is thrips. Thrips are tiny insects with piercing and sucking mouthparts. Their feeding damage totally ruins lisianthus blooms for commercial sale. Thrips can be controlled organically with a combination of BotaniGard (*Beauveria bassiana*) and Azatin XL (neem). Thrips can be controlled chemically with Conserve, Thiodan and Mesurol.

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